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Japan Food Trends December 2008

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Report Highlights:

Black potage, medicinal cuisine, Japanese space food, and polypropylene doggy bags were in the November news and along with these we introduce some out-of-this-world products in Japan in this month's Japan Food Trends.

Note: Japan Food Trends (JFT) communicates Japanese food and lifestyle trends that may help U.S. exporters to generate product and marketing ideas.

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Editor's Note

We've written quite a bit about the Japanese food culture and sometimes fanatical Japanese qualities. But are we still that different from the Japanese? Perhaps not, since the Japanese learn from the U.S. about food safety systems; doggy bags have been around since I was a kid; I remember space ice cream, too. In this issue, we introduce to you some more "Japanese" trends and food related stories. A new product in the market is black potage (p4 of 4). I haven't tried it yet, but it sounds like a winner.

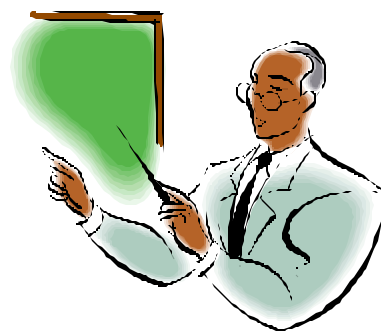
To the Readers:

ATO Japan is developing a new business website called U.S. Agricultural Trade Office Japan (us-ato.jp), which will launch in mid-January. We will be sending you food business information and market trends through the website and hope that it will help connect your business to the Japanese food industry. We will keep you posted about the launch date.

Food Safety

Store Food Safety Advisors 3000 Nikkei MJ December 5, 2008, p4

Not at all close to the thrill and power of the Spartan movie, "300", department stores are gearing up to build a standing army of Food Safety Advisors on their food floors. In a previous JFT issue, we reported that the Japan Department Store Association would educate 3,000 Department Store Food Safety Advisors (DSFSA). Since November, prospective advisors have been taking distance learning courses to prepare for the first examination set for January 2009.



Certification includes the knowledge of product origin labeling, health management, food related laws and regulations for the purpose of safe purchasing and responding to customer inquiries. The examiner must correctly answer 80% of multiple choice questions in three different fields and submit a related report. DSFSA will arm their floor advisors with Department Store Food Safety Passports to hand out to customers and a Food Safety Advisor badge.

Department stores are also helping in other food areas, such as food waste prevention. They are helping to put doggy bags into the hands of their customers.

Environment

Polypropylene Doggy Bags Asahi Shimbun, December 9, 2008



I've heard many Japanese who comment on the volume of food served in U.S. restaurants. Most say it is just too much to eat, many say they return to Japan a bit over weight and some say there is probably a lot of waste. Well, there is perhaps some truth to their experience, but Japan is not immune to the problem of ordering too much food and creating waste.

Source: Nikkei Trendy net

You might wonder why doggy bags haven't been around in Japan. Well, it is mostly due to the hot and muggy weather conditions and that restaurants cannot take the risk of food poisoning. It is also just not customary. However, with the movement to re-evaluate how the Japanese eat, wasteful eating, especially in the food service industry, has become a point of scrutiny.

Under the banner of "Take home leftovers" DOGGY BAG containers hit the department store shelves in September. The DOGGY BAG isn't just a small size paper bag. In order to be even more eco-friendly, a reusable, easy to carry box made from polypropylene that can be unfolded for portability was developed. The box can also endure heat up to 70 degrees Celsius. Department stores sell a large and small size combination pack for 780 yen.

One of the goals of this campaign is to get restaurants to stock these DOGGY BAGs for their customers, but with the risk of food poisoning that the restaurant in almost every case would bear the responsibility, has not caught on.

According to the article, one restaurant patron who purchased the DOGGY BAG said that taking home leftovers from an upscale restaurant felt like a bargain.

What is nice about the DOGGY BAG is that it looks like the boxes used by bakeries for their customers to take home cakes, which takes away the stigma of carrying around an oil stained paper bag.

Speaking about special carrying bags, Japanese space food in their retort pouches, are a small boom in Japan.

Products

Japanese Space Food Nikkei MJ, November 14, 2008, p16

Upper teenagers and lower twenty year olds are purchasing space foods quite a bit these days with the influence of Japanese astronauts. They are purchasing space food from science museums and health food internet sites. Why the popularity? One reason is that these space foods are unique and a fad. Another reason, which is probably more likely for the older generation, is that they are great as emergency food that have long expiration dates, are compact and do not require any preparation. Sales have doubled since last year.



Source: Nikkei MJ Watch net

So, what's on the menu? There are 29 items certified by the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA). Mackerel and miso stew, ramen, beef curry, youkan (bean paste confectionery), Tako-yaki (baked battered octopus), sardine tomato stew just to name a few.

Black Potage (soup) Nikkei MJ, November 24, 2008, p2

Time and time again, the color black is an attention getter for food products in Japan. Asahi Beverage has come out with a new product called "Black Potage". The black color is a result of black sesame paste that is added to corn soup. Black sesame is an ingredient that has received much positive attention from nutritionists for its health benefits.

It's not only the soup that is black though. The can packaging is also finished with black giving it a chic presence on store shelves.

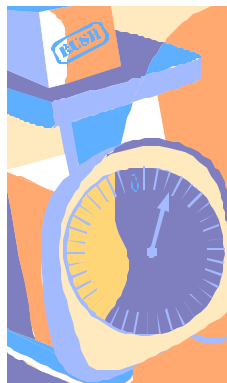


Source: Yahoo Japan store shopping

Health***Medicinal Cuisine and Blood Circulation Nihon Keizai Shimbun, November 27, 2008, p5***

Yakuzen or medicinal cuisine is known to help people with hieshou, which is a chronic symptom of coldness in the hands, fingers, feet, or toes. A survey of 21,425 women found that 46% of them had hieshou. More and more men are found with the same symptom. Not only hieshou, but many other symptoms such as sore shoulder and back muscles are associated with poor circulation of blood due to coldness. In order to improve these health situations more and more culinary classes are teaching medicinal cuisine and websites with recipes are becoming popular.

Perhaps in the future, we will see more health driven menus that will help blood circulation, like many introduced through the internet.

Convenience***Weighing Scales Popular in Convenient Stores Nihon Keizai Shimbun, November 26, 2008, p33***

Convenient stores shelve more and more delicatessen menus for the rising number of customers who are eating at home and at the same time making it easier for their customers to weigh their own amounts of food so they can enjoy many different items. One convenient store will prepare 16 items. All items are 178 yen per 100 grams, which is quite reasonable. Many customers like that they can scoop and measure just only what they want instead of having to take too much.